

Language and Rhetoric

Improving your skill and persuasiveness in writing and speaking

It's more exciting than you think. Well, maybe "exciting" is too strong a word. It's more enjoyable. Well...it's more useful! Yes. Useful.

Rhetoric: Definitions and Examples

- *The fact is, as we said at the beginning of our discussion, that the aspiring speaker needs no knowledge of the truth about what is right or good... In courts of justice no attention is paid whatever to the truth about such topics; all that matters is plausibility... There are even some occasions when both prosecution and defence should positively suppress the facts in favor of probability, if the facts are improbable. Never mind the truth -- pursue probability through thick and thin in every kind of speech; the whole secret of the art of speaking lies in consistent adherence to this principle.*
- **Socrates**
- **Rhetoric**, from the Greek for “orator,” is the art of analyzing all the language choices that writer, speaker, reader, or listener might make in a given situation so the text becomes meaningful, purposeful, and effective (AND “rhetoric” also refers to these specific features of the text that make it effective)

Rhetoric: What's the point?

- Being skilled at rhetoric can yield a number of benefits:
 - The ability to make better speeches and write better papers (as well as listen to and read the works of others with a more critical approach)
 - The ability not just to understand a writer's main points, but also to analyze the decisions the writer/speaker made and understand why they were effective/ineffective.
 - The ability to *plan and write* an effective paper--not just to get something onto paper before the due date.
 - The ability to confront a real situation in your life (not necessarily school-related) and understand how you can be more persuasive or effective in getting the result you want.

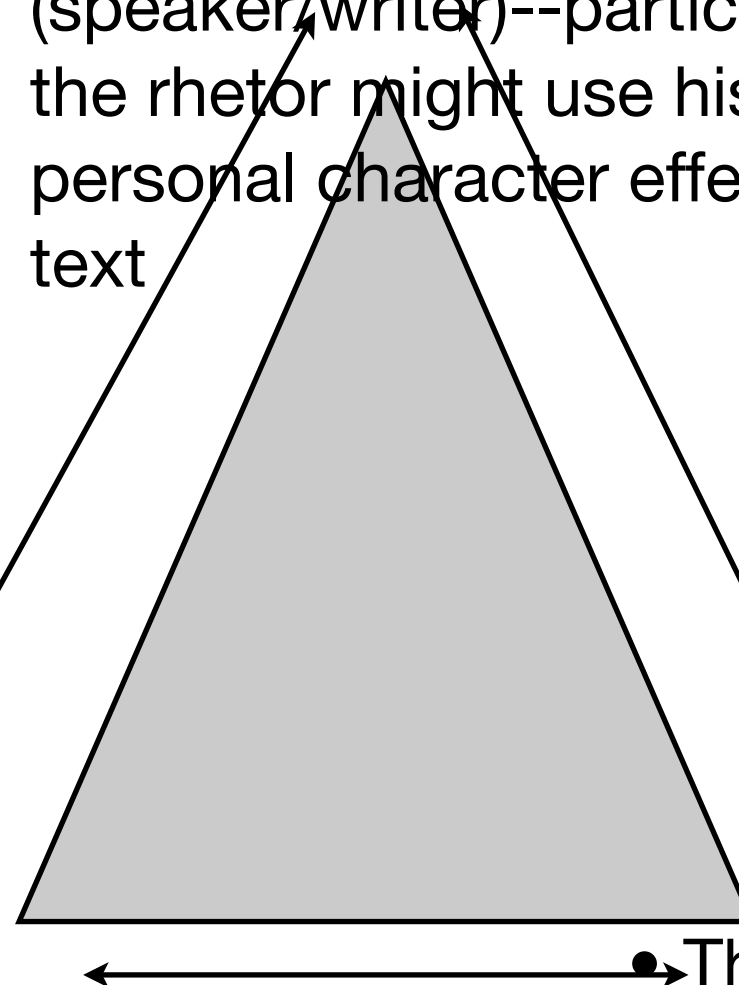
Rhetoric: The Rhetorical Triangle (a.k.a. The Aristotelian triad)

- Basic rhetorical model. Suggests that a person creating or analyzing a text must consider three elements:

- The **character** of the rhetor (speaker/writer)--particularly how the rhetor might use his/her personal character effectively in a text

- The **audience**: their knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs.

- The **subject** and the kinds of evidence used to develop it



The Speaker/Writer (a.k.a. Persona)

- **persona**: the character that the audience perceives behind the text. This is created by the author, based on whom the writer presumes the audience will be and based on the subject of the text. The persona could be an academic, intelligent figure; a mocking, sarcastic figure; a bitter, angry figure, and so on.
- When analyzing **persona** or creating your own, you should consider **voice**: textual features such as **diction** (word choice) and **syntax** (sentence structure) that convey persona and contribute to **tone** (the author's attitude towards his/her subject).

The Audience

- Aristotle taught that persuasion occurs because a rhetor makes three kinds of **appeals** to the audience through a spoken or written text:
 - A rhetor appeals to **logos** (*appeal to logic*) by offering a clear, reasonable central idea(s) and developing it with appropriate evidence to appeal to an audience's sense of logic, or reason
 - A rhetor appeals to **ethos** (*appeal based on the character or reputation of the persona*) by offering evidence that he or she is credible--knows important and relevant information about the topic at hand and is a good, believable person who has the readers' best interests in mind.
 - A rhetor appeals to **pathos** (*appeal to emotion*) by drawing on the emotions and interests of the audience so that they will be sympathetically inclined to accept and buy into central arguments.

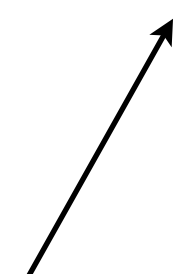
See <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/webclass/web/project1/group4/>

Persona and Audience in Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (paragraph 11).

critical **tone** towards people who say they oppose slavery but don't act to stop it



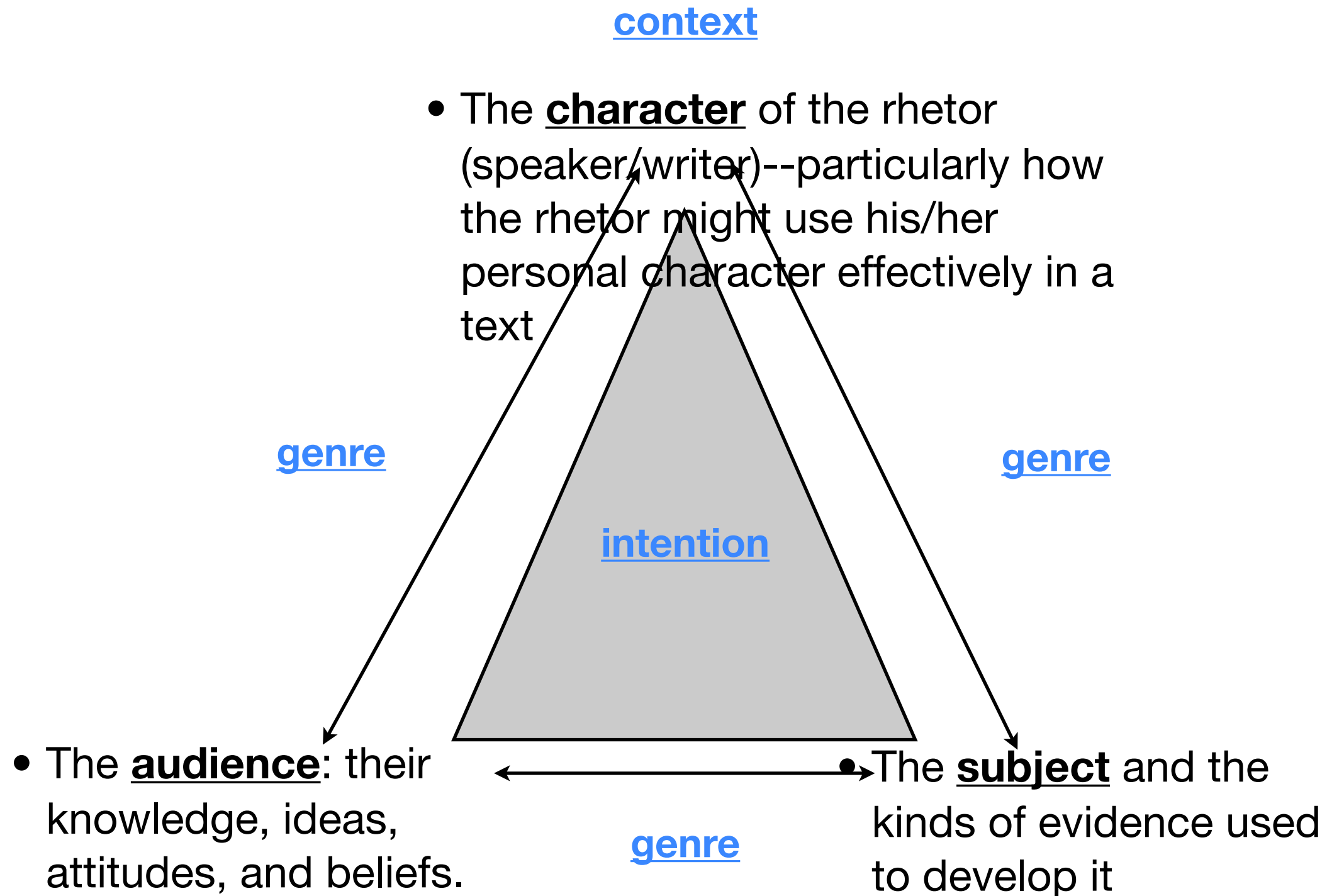
Syntax consists of long clauses punctuated by a variety of pauses (commas and semicolons), replicating the pacing of an academic, formal speech.

- “There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; **who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing...They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret.**” (paragraph 11)
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tone is again critical, even mocking, of those who won't act

Diction establishes concept of slavery as “evil”, and appeals to **pathos** (reader's emotions), insinuating that they'll feel “regret” if they don't act.

Adding to The Rhetorical Triangle



Rhetorical Triangle: continued

- **context**: a convergence of time, place, people, events, and motivating forces that influences how the rhetor understands, analyzes, and generates the persona, appeals, and subject matter.
 - Consider: The 2011 SuperBowl; the revolution in Egypt; September 11th; Columbine; The Vietnam War; The Korean War; The Teapot Dome Scandal. Some of these events are more present in your mind and you have more prior knowledge and context for them; others, you might not have even heard of (besides 10th grade American history).
 - Tiger Woods. Lindsay Lohan. Britney Spears. OJ Simpson. Anna Nicole Smith. Tonya Harding. (I'm betting you have less of a context for some of these scandalous subjects as the list goes on).

Rhetorical Triangle: continued

- **aim** or **purpose** or **intention**: the goal you're trying to achieve via rhetoric.
 - You may be writing to a government official attempting to persuade him/her to support some local recycling initiative (ok, more realistically, you may be drafting some facebook message that you're gonna send to some girl you met in study hall the other day...same thing here). In both of these cases, you already know your aim or intention: persuasion. You just need to find the evidence to do so.
- **genre**: a piece of writing classified by type: e.g. letter, narrative, eulogy, or editorial. You select an appropriate **genre** for your work based on your aim, context, subject, audience, and persona (i.e. all the other factors).

Structure of Persuasion (ancient Roman style)

- This was the structure taught in Ancient Rome, primarily for the courtroom. It's not intended to be an arrangement for all arguments and genres, but it's a good starting point for analysis or construction.
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- 1) the **exordium**: the *web* that draws listeners into the speech, the speaker would introduce the subject at hand and include material that would make the audience attentive and receptive to the **argument**.
 - 2) the **narration** would offer background material on the case at hand
 - 3) the **partition** would divide the case and make clear which part or parts the speaker was going to address, which parts the speaker would not take up and what order would be followed in the development
 - 4) the **confirmation** would offer points to substantiate the argument and provide reasons, details, illustrations, and examples in support
 - 5) the **refutation** would consider possible objections to the argument and try to counter these
 - 6) the **peroration** would draw together the entire argument and include material designed to compel the audience to think or act in a way related to the central argument